

# THE MORRIS AND SWORD DANCES OF ENGLAND



Printed for the Morris Ring

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# **The Morris and Sword Dances of England**

by Arthur Peck

*Revised 1978*



Thanks are due to the following for kindly lending photographs:

The English Folk Dance and Song Society for:-

Cecil Sharp  
William Kimber  
Abingdon  
Bampton  
Britannia  
Handsworth  
Royal Earsdon

Bill Smith, Stevenage, for Lancashire Morris

David Campbell, Saffron Walden, for the Fool and the Unicorn

Brian Shuel for Abbots Bromley and Headington Quarry

*COVER –*

Green Man's Morris at Chipperfield, Hertfordshire

Photograph – Hemel Hempstead Post Echo

# **The Morris and Sword Dances of England**

## **MORRIS DANCING**

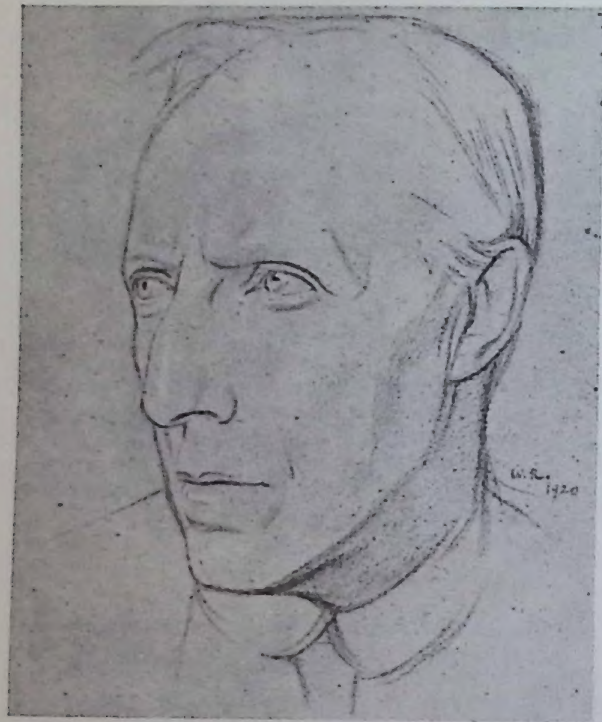
Morris Men dance the Morris because they enjoy it, and because they find that others enjoy watching it. In the past thirty years the increase in the number of Morris clubs has made the Morris a familiar sight all over the country, especially during the spring and summer months. The purpose of this booklet is to tell those who see the dancing that there are several distinct forms of the traditional English Morris; to tell, briefly, the story of its survival; and, perhaps, to help the onlooker to understand its fascination for the dancers.

## **ANTIQUITY**

The Morris has a very ancient history; much more ancient than fifteenth and sixteenth century references to it (in church records, for instance): football, cricket and other well-known sports are comparatively recent. Until about a century ago most of the Cotswold villages had a Morris side (some more than one) each dancing its own local variants of the Morris dances. The traditional time for Morris dancing in the Cotswolds was Whitsun, and some teams used to spend all Whitsun week dancing in their own neighbourhoods. Nowadays the Morris men dance throughout the year, indoors and out.

## **SURVIVAL THROUGH BAD TIMES**

The changes in social conditions, and the great drift from the land in the second half of the nineteenth century, had a bad effect on the Cotswold Morris; and it ceased to be danced in many villages; but where there was a man of enthusiasm and determination, the Morris persisted through those changes and the upheavals of two world wars. At Bampton, near Witney, Oxfordshire, William Wells (who died in November, 1953, aged 85) as dancer and fiddler ensured that the Bampton Morris maintained an unbroken continuity with a distant past; and that it was shown every Whit-Monday - nowadays, of



**Cecil Sharp**  
(*From a portrait by Sir William Rothenstein*)



course, the Spring Bank Holiday, when the Bampton men can be seen dancing in their own town. At Headington Quarry, on the outskirts of Oxford, William Kimber was the driving force; not only the present Headington Quarry team, which has an international reputation, but all Morris men are indebted to him. Throughout a long life he helped Morris men to the utmost of his ability. He died on Boxing Day, 1961, at the age of 89; it was 62 years to the day after his first meeting with Cecil Sharp.

### **CECIL SHARP**

Cecil Sharp, a professional musician of standing, was staying at Headington for Christmas, 1899. On Boxing Day he looked out of the drawing room window, and saw a little group of men in white clothes coming up the drive. It was the Headington Quarry Morris side, coming to dance; they were out of work, and hoped to earn a little money, even if it were the wrong time of the year for the Morris. Cecil Sharp invited William Kimber to come next day, and to play Morris tunes for him. William Kimber did so, and the two men began a life-long friendship; and Cecil Sharp began his great work of recovering the Morris dances. During the following years he visited village after village in the Cotswolds, finding the old dancers, learning from them the tunes and steps and figures of their dances, and then teaching them to others. He did the same in the North-East of England, where he found many traditional Sword-dance teams. Without Cecil Sharp's persistence and enthusiasm, not only in collecting and learning the dances but also in getting other people to dance them, most of the Morris might have been lost for ever. By means of the English Folk Dance Society (later amalgamated with the Folk Song Society) which he founded in 1911, he spread the knowledge and practice of the dances. Cecil Sharp died in 1924; and a few years later, in his memory, Cecil Sharp House was built in Regent's Park Road in London, as a centre for traditional dancing and singing.

### **THE MORRIS MEN'S CLUBS**

In time, as knowledge of the dances spread, a number of Morris men's clubs were formed. There were only a few clubs at first; but now they flourish in every part of the country. They meet regularly for practice, and to give public shows; some clubs go touring for as much as a week at a time, dancing in towns



William Kimber



and villages. Each club is independent, makes its own plans, and elects its own officers. Usually, a club has a Squire (Captain) and Bagman (Secretary and Treasurer), and sometimes a Foreman, who will be responsible for teaching in the club. Each club has its own distinguishable costume, derived from traditional forms. Many wear baldricks (crossed shoulder ribbons); some wear tabards; some jackets; some apply rosettes to fronts and backs of shirts. By colour and design on the costume, a club can indicate a civic or territorial association.

## **THE MORRIS RING**

In 1934 representatives from six of the early clubs met and decided to institute The Morris Ring, to be a federation of Morris clubs all over the country. The six founder clubs were Cambridge (which began the moves to a federation, and suggested its title), East Surrey, Greensleeves, Letchworth, Oxford and Thaxted – all still in existence.

Although some of the men of forty years ago lived to witness the great increase in the number of Morris clubs, none could have foreseen it. The Morris Ring issues an address list of all known Morris clubs, both those associated together in the Ring, and those not yet admitted; that list shows 250 Morris clubs. It includes at least twenty outside the British Isles – more than a dozen of them in the United States. The Officers of The Ring are the Squire (President) elected by the clubs, to hold office for two years only; and the Bagman Secretary and the Bagman Treasurer, each elected for two years, but able to hold office for an indefinite period. The offices of the Ring are onerous, but unpaid.

## **MORRIS RING GATHERINGS**

It has become customary for the Morris Ring to organize several weekend gatherings every year (seven in 1977) in different parts of the country, at which men from various clubs meet and dance together. At some of the meetings nearly four hundred men have been present. On the Saturday the teams separate into groups to dance in the villages surrounding a host town; and reassemble in that town later in the day to give a big public display, followed by a semi-formal dinner together. That meal continues such customs as the Kirtlington (Oxon) Lamb Ale, held annually in the week following Whitsun week until



The Abingdon Morris  
Dancers: The Chairing  
of the Mayor of Ock  
Street.

about the middle of last century, which was attended by Morris sides for many miles around. The only Ring Meeting to be held in the same place every year is at Thaxted, in Essex; where in fact there has been a meeting of Morris clubs every year since 1927, seven years before the formation of the Morris Ring.

## **Varieties of the Morris**

### **THE COTSWOLD MORRIS**

One well-known variety of the Morris is that which originally belonged to the Cotswolds. The team consists of six dancers and the musician, and, usually, the Fool. The instruments most generally favoured by the dancers in earlier times were the pipe and tabor, the fiddle, and the concertina. All of these, with the addition of the accordion, are used today. Many of the tunes used for the dances are not otherwise known, and are of remote antiquity; others have been borrowed and adapted from popular songs at various periods. The tunes and steps and dances of each village differed slightly from those of other villages; hence we have the various "traditions", called after the names of the villages to which they belong. Important traditions are those of Adderbury, near Banbury; of Bampton; of Bledington, near Stow-on-the-Wold; Brackley, Northants; Bucknell, near Bicester; Fieldtown (or Leafield) near Burford, Oxon; Headington Quarry; Ilmington, near Stratford-on-Avon; Longborough, near Stow-on-the-Wold; and Sherborne, Glos. Any programme of Cotswold morris dances which you see is almost certain to include dances from some of those "traditions". Two traditional teams, Abingdon (now in Oxfordshire, formerly in Berkshire), and Chipping Campden, in Gloucestershire, ask others not to use their dances; and Morris clubs do not dance them. The spectator will notice that the Cotswold set-dances, for six men, include handkerchief dances, stick dances, and hand-clapping dances. The Cotswold Morris also has jigs for a single dancer, or for two dancers. The jigs give the good dancers an opportunity to display their skill, to provide a change for the spectators, and to give a rest for the other dancers.





The Bampton Morris Dancers

The Thaxted Fool and the  
Westminster Unicorn







Dances with affinities to the Cotswold Morris have been discovered in Worcestershire and Herefordshire, and at Lichfield in Staffordshire. The recovery of the ancient Lichfield dances, never shown outside the City, so far as is known, until 1954, was one of the most exciting events of the last quarter century. Another important and unique traditional dance, of a different character, is the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance (Staffs.) which is performed annually in September. Here the chief dancers carry reindeer horns, which when not in use are kept in the church.

### **THE DERBYSHIRE MORRIS**

The dances of Derbyshire are somewhat different in type from those of the Cotswolds, and require up to sixteen dancers. The set-dances are more familiar in form to reels and country dances; and the processional dances, which are a feature of the Derbyshire Morris, are particularly effective. The Processional Dance from Winster is generally used when a large number of Morris men moves through the streets at Ring Meetings. Although there is not an active traditional men's side in Derbyshire at the present time, there are signs of revival in villages where the old dancers remain.

### **THE LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE MORRIS.**

The Lancashire and Cheshire Morris belongs principally to the industrial towns, and was in full vigour about the middle of the nineteenth century. Many teams continued until 1914, and several were still dancing after 1919. In type it is similar to the Derbyshire Morris, but there is more "stepping" and the general effect is more spectacular. The dress of the dancers is the most elaborate and colourful of all English dancers' costumes, and the effect of the stepping is accentuated by the decorated clogs that are worn. Instead of the handkerchiefs and sticks used by the Cotswold dancers the Lancashire men carry "slings" of untwisted cotton rope; or "tiddlers" which are made of rope bound with coloured ribbon. Some teams carry short sticks bound in a similar way; but these are never struck together.

A typical example of the Lancashire Morris is the Mossley Dance, which requires a minimum of nine men. One of these is the Leader, who does not take a great part in the actual dance, but calls the figures, or indicates a change of figure by blowing a whistle. Sometimes he will execute more complicated steps while the other dancers are performing a figure. The music is often provided by several concertinas and a drum.



The Britannia Coco-nut Dancers,  
Bacup, Lancs.

A traditional team shown is the Britannia Coco-nut Dancers from Bacup; this dance is a unique variety of the Morris within the Lancashire tradition; the dancers black their faces before going out to dance. In the old days the Lancashire Morris was often associated with the rushcart processions in Wakes Week.

## **SWORD DANCES**

Many Morris clubs perform one or more of the English Sword Dances; and some clubs make Sword dancing their main or only activity. A number of traditional teams are still active. There are two types of English Sword Dance:

1. *The Longsword dance*, which is performed by six or eight men, who carry rigid swords, from 30 to 40 inches long, made either of steel or wood. The dancers begin by clashing their swords together, after which they line up in a ring or in pairs, and perform intricate figures during which they pass over or under the swords; finally they plait the swords into a star-shaped Lock which is held aloft at the climax of the dance. The usual time for the performance of the Longsword dances was about Christmas; but in some districts it was seen about Plough Monday, the Monday after Twelfth Night (Epiphany). Although it was once practised throughout Yorkshire and the adjacent counties east of the Pennines, traditional performers of the dance are now found only in two areas, round Sheffield and in the Cleveland district of North Yorkshire, where there are a number of teams, particularly in the iron-mining villages. Because the swords form a rigid link between the dancers, and the movements are comparatively slow, a very high level of control and co-ordination is needed in Longsword Dances.

2. *The Shortsword or Rapper Dance*. The "rappers" used in this dance are flexible and have two handles, and the hilt-and-point ring of dancers normally consists of five men, accompanied by two additional characters, the "Tommy" and the "Betty", each of whom carries a rapper; and sometimes they join in skilfully with the main dancers towards the conclusion of the dance.

The Rapper is found in a limited area along Tyneside in Northumberland and Co. Durham. Fifteen of the twenty-nine known Rapper traditions have been found within a circle only a few miles in diameter. The





John o' Gaunt Morris Men, Lancashire Morris

Longsword dances have close parallels in Germany and elsewhere, but nothing comparable with the Rapper dance is known. There is nothing quite like it for speed and complexity among the traditional ceremonial dances of Europe. Although there are no written records of it before the seventeenth century, in all probability it is of very ancient origin. The credit for maintaining this unique Christmastide custom belongs to the coal-miners of Tyneside.

In performing the dance the miners wore "hoggers" — the open ended breeches normally worn during working hours. These can be seen in the photograph of the Royal Earsdon Sword Dancers.

A distinctive feature of the Sword dances, which may occur once or several times in a performance, is the Lock or Nut, in which the swords are plaited together. The English Sword Dances must be clearly distinguished from the Scottish Sword Dance, in which the swords are not held in the hands but two swords are laid crosswise on the ground, and the dancer performs his steps over and between the swords. The corresponding English dance is the Bacca Pipes Jig, danced over two churchwarden pipes laid crosswise, which is sometimes performed in our shows.

### **THE MORRIS TODAY**

Nearly eighty years after the chance meeting between Cecil Sharp and William Kimber, the Morris has become a national pastime, and there are a large number of experienced dancers. In recent years, patient research into manuscripts and other records has recovered many dances not shown within living memory. The unique and ancient heritage of the English Morris, so nearly lost and now in full vigour, is secure for the foreseeable future.

### **THE FUTURE**

We hope that you will enjoy seeing the dances, and perhaps some of you will feel that you would like to begin dancing yourselves, or to learn to play for the dancers. If so, there may be a Club near where you live, whose practices you might be able to attend. Write to the Bagman (i.e. Secretary) of the Morris Ring, c/o Cecil Sharp House, 2 Regent's Park Road, London NW1 7AY.



The Handsworth Traditional Sword Dancers,  
Sheffield (Longsword)





The Royal Earsdon Sword Dancers,  
(Rapper-sword)



The Headington Quarry  
Morris Dancers

## **SQUIRES OF THE MORRIS RING**

1934-36	†Alec Hunter
1936-38	†Kenworthy Schofield
1938-47	Douglas Kennedy
1947-50	†Arthur Peck
1950-52	†Frederick Hamer
1952-54	Geoffrey Metcalf
1954-56	Donald Cassels
1956-58	Bill Cassie
1958-60	Jim Phillips

1960-62	Nibs Matthews
1962-64	Lionel Bacon
1964-66	Leslie Nichols
1966-68	Alan Brown
1968-70	John Venables
1970-72	Bert Cleaver
1972-74	Colin Fleming
1974-76	Morris Sunderland
1976-78	David Welti
1978-	Ivor Allsop

## **BAGMEN OF THE MORRIS RING**

1934-46	Walter Abson
1946-50	Robert Ross
1950-59	Russell Wortley

1959-71	Ewart Russell
1971-77	John Wells
1977-	Michael Garland

## **TREASURER OF THE MORRIS RING**

1977-	Barry Care
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† Deceased



